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MEMORIAL ADDRESS

BY

HORACE CHILTON,

ON THE

LIFE AND CHARACTER

OF

HON. ISHAM G. HARRIS

(LATE A SENATOR FROM TENNESSEE),

IN THE

SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,

MARCH 24, 1898.

WASHINGTON.
1898.

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MEMORIAL ADDRESS ON THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF HON. ISHAM G. HARRIS.

Mr. CHILTON. Mr. President, while I did not know Senator HARRIS with the intimacy of long personal association, I have since a boy been familiar with his writings, speeches, and public conduct.

The State in which I live has been supplied abundantly from the great State of Tennessee. Many of our best citizens emigrated to Texas from that Commonwealth; and I have noticed that they all seem to know and to love ISHAM G. HARRIS.

So when I first came to the Senate for a short term by appointment of the governor, more than six years ago, I felt that curiosity about Senator HARRIS which always animates younger men to know the actors in great events, sharpened by the recollection of stories told concerning his achievements by those who had long been his personal friends.

When I first saw him, in 1891, he was well ripened and probably at his best.

I have often watched him, in the cloakroom, in his Senatorial seat, in the chair of the presiding officer, and he always seemed the same. I do not remember ever to have heard him laugh aloud. There was the twinkle in the eye, the manifest enjoyment in the general merriment, but he never appeared to "turn himself loose."

I picture him as he would come into the Senate Chamber. There, in his familiar place on the right of the Vice-President, in the front row, he would take his seat. He hardly seems to say anything as if by previous design. He seems never to make an occasion, but to find it in the current proceedings as set on foot by others. He seems to spy out that something is taking an irregular direction and that he must set it right. He first asks a question or calls for the reading of some document, as if he imperfectly understood it. Then he proceeds to clear up all doubts. First emphasis, then gesticulation—no, not in succession, but an indescribable combination of emphasis and gesticulation.

Attention has often been called to his absolute primacy in the Senate on all questions relating to parliamentary law. Up to the very hour of his last appearance here he was so clear and so magisterial that he never lost his authority in that field.

As has been stated, his service in Congress began in the House of Representatives at the session which convened in December, 1849, and in that his first session of service he exhibited that peculiar interest in questions of legislative practice which marked his long Senatorial career, for the reporter makes the following observation touching the proceedings of a particular day:

> Some conversation followed on points of order, in which Messrs. HARRIS of Tennessee, White, Disney, Rumsey, Wentworth, and the Speaker participated.

During his four years in the House I find that he made only one set speech. The Wilmot proviso, with all its exciting incidents, was then the subject of consideration. In that speech we find the same principles, the same habits of thought and manner, which marked his life fifty years afterwards. There was brevity, for, though the contest was prolonged and the temptation to digress great, he spoke but an hour. There was the strict construction of the Constitution, for he dwelt on the rule that Congress possesses no powers except those expressly delegated by the Constitution or necessary to the exercise of some expressly delegated power; and he, who rarely ever quoted, repeats in that speech the words of another great American in protest against those "vagrant, wandering powers that find no congenial spot on which to rest upon the broad face of the Constitution of the country."

This was his chart of political action in every place of duty. He followed it after leaving Congress in 1853, and it governed his action during all those stirring years which led up to the civil war.

Perhaps the most eventful part of the life of Senator HARRIS was that which related to the great organization of secession. The governors of the Southern States in 1861 were almost without exception men of strong character and ability. The most remarkable of these governors were Brown of Georgia, Letcher of Virginia, Sam Houston of Texas, and HARRIS of Tennessee.

In the difficulties of their surroundings and in vigor of intel-

lectual comprehension the Texas and Tennessee governors stand highest among this group.

Sam Houston was a strong Union man. The whole secession movement was resisted by him, but, notwithstanding his extraordinary power in Texas, he found himself gradually submerged by a rising wave of public sentiment, which finally reached the velocity of a torrent, drove him out of the governor's chair, and took the State out of the Union. There was the spectacle of a man who had been strong in the affections of his State overridden by an excited and determined people, and unable, with all his popularity and influence, to make the slightest headway. He stood almost alone, a Unionist and a conservative, in the midst of organized, indignant, irreconcilable revolution.

The situation of Governor HARRIS in Tennessee was quite a different one. He sympathized with secession, he wanted to take his State out of the Union, and he used his powers and his influence to accomplish the very result which Sam Houston had endeavored to obstruct in Texas. His task was not like that which fell to the hands of the governors in States like South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, where both the people and the executive, with common impulse, hailed the banner of a new confederation. On the contrary, a powerful section of the Tennessee people, led by Andrew Johnson, a great Senator belonging to the same party, confronted Governor HARRIS in his policy of secession.

We need not dwell upon the details of that struggle, but it is enough to say that the courage, tenacity, and generalship of HARRIS prevailed against the combined efforts of Whig and Democratic Union leaders in Tennessee and added that State to the number of those which constituted the Southern Confederacy.

ISHAM G. HARRIS was one of the few public men of whom the people never seemed to tire.

Ordinarily popularity is fleeting. The remarkable changes which come over the House and the Senate in the course of a single decade attest the instability of official tenure; but a few men seem proof against all disfavor. If they are ever criticised, their critics are forgotten; if condemned for a vote, they are forgiven. To carry opposition to the point of actually defeating

their reelection would be considered at home a sort of high treason. So strong is the general confidence in their high purpose and right judgment that it always prevails over minor difficulties when election day rolls around.

Senator HARRIS was one of these rare characters. He was the hero not only of Tennessee but of Tennesseeans scattered throughout the Union. He grew, in their estimation, to be a sort of lineal successor to Andrew Jackson. His name and life and peculiarities always touched their enthusiasm.

To me the most impressive thing in his strong individuality was his willingness always to take responsibility and his absolute unconcern about results—that cheerful faith that the right will take care of itself and that there need be no anxiety on the part of a public man except the anxiety to be right.

I have seen men whom God had blessed with conscience and courage, but not with equanimity, so that, knowing the truth and voting the truth, they were still nervous that they should not be misunderstood and fidgeting about consequences which they were determined to face.

Not so with Senator HARRIS. He seemed to think that a man who acted truly upon his convictions of right held an absolute insurance policy against all disaster at the hands of the people.

What a great life may be worked out on that sort of logic. You may put a small man in Congress, and if he looks at every question as it arises with a heart single and an eye single to finding out the right, in a few years such a dignity will be given to his apparent mediocrity that he will gradually emerge above the level of his fellows and assume a consideration in the country which will make men wonder at the secret of his rise.

If men of moderate mind can be thus lifted by the practice of simple straightforwardness, how splendid becomes the principle when it acts on a man of native intellectual power and force of character! This was the combination in the case of ISHAM G. HARRIS. He was always clear, always firm, always true, always great.

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